



The Trouble with Bipartisanship

By: Mike Pesca

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Day to Day, January 25, 2007 · The November congressional election renewed the call for bipartisanship between Democrats and Republicans. But there have been past incidents where bipartisanship produced regrettable results.

MADELEINE BRAND, host:

This is DAY TO DAY. I'm Madeleine Brand.

ALEX CHADWICK, host:

I'm Alex Chadwick.

Coming up, animals versus ethanol. Rising corn prices are converting fields once reserved for pheasants and hunters to agriculture.

BRAND: But first, this week on NPR, a series on bipartisanship we're calling Crossing the Divide. On Monday's MORNING EDITION, NPR's Mara Liasson asked this rhetorical question.

MARA LIASSON: Of course being for bipartisanship is like being for peace and prosperity. Who would disagree?

BRAND: Well, NPR's Mike Pesca, that's who.

MIKE PESCA: Today, the word partisanship, much like the word cannibalism, conjures up a mode of behavior that most people find distasteful. In defense of partisanship, here's one example, far away from the ornate halls of Congress.

During the Nazi occupation of Lithuania, the Jews of Vilna, now called Vilnius, were

herded into two ghettos, which eventually became one after mass killings. But some Jews fought back. Here's one of their anthems, "Zog Nit Keyn Mol."

The lyrics are, Never say that you are walking down the final road. These fighters were known as the Partisans of Vilna.

(Soundbite of song, "Zog Nit Keyn Mol")

PESCA: Today, partisanship has become something like the eighth deadly sin, and yet the history of the U.S. Congress is replete with examples of partisan success and bipartisan debacle.

Julian Zelizer, a professor of U.S. history at Boston University, points us to the 1993 Deficit Reduction Bill, which passed without a single Republican vote in either the House or Senate.

Prof. JULIAN ZELIZER (Boston University): Some people don't like that bill, but many praised the '93 deficit reduction as a model of what the government needs to do more of in terms of trying to restrain spending, increase taxes on wealthier

Americans, and keep the budget in some kind of order. And there, some would say, partisanship worked quite well.

PESCA: Many of that bill's strongest supporters are the very people now saying that partisanship is a destructive force. It's not that easy to find purely partisan bills that seem to have worked well. But bipartisan missteps riddle the Halls of Congress.

Fred Beuttler is deputy historian of the U.S. House of Representatives. He takes us back to 1887 with the passage of a bill called the Dawes Act. It scrapped the reservation system and deeded land to individual American Indians.

Mr. FRED BEUTTLER (Deputy Historian): What this does is take about two-thirds of Indian land and basically turns it over to the federal government. And if you go back and look at the Dawes Act that's been passed unanimously in the both the House and the Senate, there you've got complete bipartisan agreement on something that ended up being in many ways a disaster.

PESCA: There are plenty of other examples. The Neutrality Acts, which kept the U.S. on the sidelines as Hitler marched through Europe, were bipartisan. The act, which backed up Franklin Roosevelt's order to intern the Japanese during that war, were bipartisan. And then there was the grand social experiment called Prohibition. Fred Beuttler tallies that vote.

Mr. BEUTTNER: The first vote on setting up the 18th Amendment, there you have almost 70 percent of Democrats voting for it and almost 70 percent of Republicans voting for it.

PESCA: Luckily, the 21st Amendment repealing the 18th was also bipartisan. We should also cover the catastrophically unpopular Catastrophic Coverage Bill. In 1988, it was passed on a bipartisan basis and the next year rolled back also on a bipartisan basis, the kind of act that keeps bringing people together. Polls say that right now the public wants bipartisanship. But dig in to the data and you'll find what they really want is good laws.

Sometimes bipartisanship is the engine for good laws, and sometimes it's bipartisanship that's slamming on the brakes.

Mr. ZELIZER: When both parties don't want something to happen, that could be as powerful as when they do wanted to happen.

PESCA: Julian Zelizer notes that the Civil Rights Act is usually hailed as a triumph for bipartisanship. Sometimes forgotten is that it was a bipartisan coalition that blocked the bill for decades.

Mr. ZELIZER: Between the 1930s and 1960s, 1964, it was impossible to pass civil rights legislation in America, true civil rights legislation for African-Americans, because there was a true bipartisan coalition of southern Democrats and Republicans who agreed on several things, but one was not to pass any substantive civil rights bill.

PESCA: The era of reform that we live now is quirky to a historian, because, as Zelizer notes, right after the Watergate scandal, liberal Democrats began demanding an end to bipartisanship. They argued that big ideas usually fell victim to backroom chumminess.

Mr. ZELIZER: The idea of reform in the '70s was the opposite of what it is today. Back

then it was to make sure that those friendships weren't really how things got done in Washington, and make sure the party stood for something. And today, it's almost as if there is a yearning to go back to that old system.

PESCA: Overall, Zelizer says, bipartisanship is generally good, but hardly a cure-all. Because he knows that even when Democrats and Republicans agree, the judgment of history often begs to differ.

Mike Pesca, NPR News, New York.